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Prosody

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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

COMMENT

PROSODY

A RECENT discussion of prosody in *The Freeman* brought so many disputants to the fore, each with a different point of view, as to remind at least one of them of the welter of chaos and confusion in which that so-called science finds itself foundering today. Since poets and scholiasts are so at loggerheads about the fundamental technique of the verse-art practiced by the one group and analyzed by the other, it may be well to remind ourselves of the basic origins of rhythm, and of the history, not of poetry itself, but of the system of laws formulated and developed by grammarians from the study of poetry.

Rhythm is of course a universal principle, the very pulse-beat of life and of all the arts. From the amoeba to man, from the atom to the star, rhythm, or power moving regularly in time-beats, is a recognizable law which all creation must obey. The more closely modern science studies the universe—through microscope, telescope, or the naked eye and brain of man—the more astonishing and magnificent becomes this infinite harmony: an intricate weaving of small patterns within great ones, a march of ordered melody, outreaching human eyes and ears, outracing even that “only reality” the human imagination. The arts are an effort to join in, to weave little imitation patterns, sound little imita-

tion tunes. Even the static arts must respond with balanced form and color in painting, sculpture, architecture—else their manifestations are temporary and incongruous, part of the perishable scum and waste.

Music and poetry seem to have been among the earliest and most direct human manifestations of the universal rhythmic impulse. At first they were united—lyric rapture instinctively fitted words to melody, as it does still in certain forms of spontaneous folk-song like keening over the dead or other primitive rhapsodies of prayer and praise. But as life became more complex, the two arts separated, developed each its own imaginative and technical expression of the rhythmic instinct. Literature began in the creation of poems too beautiful to be left to chance memories and tongues, and therefore committed to writing. After the passing centuries had heaped up an accumulation of these masterpieces, the analysts took hold of them; and out of the practice of dead poets grammarians began to make rules for poets yet to come.

Thus prosody was born. And thus gradually it developed into a rigid science of verse-structure, a science about as scientific, from the modern point of view, as the astronomy or chemistry of the classic and mediaeval periods. For a brief review of its history one need go no further than Edmund Gosse's article on *Verse* in the *Britannica*. It was Aristoxenus of Tarentum, a grammarian contemporary with Alexander the Great and therefore much later than the golden age of Greek poetry,

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who "first laid down definite laws for prosody as a department of musical art." From his time

The theories of verse tended to release themselves from the theories of music. Rules, often of a highly arbitrary nature, were drawn up by grammarians, who founded their laws on a scholastic study of the ancient poets.

One Hephaestion wrote a manual of Greek metres in the second century A. D., which became an authority in both the Byzantine and the Alexandrian schools, and, printed at last in 1526, carried on his influence into modern languages. Of the elaborate system of classic verse-structure set forth by these and other analysts Mr. Gosse reminds us:

It must not be forgotten that the prosodical terminology of the Greeks, which is often treated by non-poetical writers as something scientific and even sacrosanct, dates from a time when ancient literature had lost all its freshness and impulse, and was exclusively the study of analysts and grammarians.

However, the classic nomenclature—the dactyls, anapaests, spondees, iambs, etc., of Greek and Latin, languages whose syllabic quantities were fairly rigid—was carried over into modern tongues of much more changeable quantities and emphatic stresses. Naturally it has proved a misfit; especially in English it is inaccurate and misleading—a mediaeval remainder strangely anachronistic in this age of scientific research. It has been a hampering influence, and would have been perhaps a destructive one if the poets, most of them, had not preserved either an invincible ignorance or a cold-hearted indifference against

all the wiles of prosodic theory. I know two or three of high distinction who don't know an iamb from a cellar-door, and couldn't scan their poems according to formula to save their necks from the Lord High Executioner.

But this virginal innocence, however desirable in the face of a false prosody, might learn much to its advantage from a prosody as accurate and scientifically complete as the system of musical notation which has so enormously stimulated musical production. As I said in the *Freeman*:

In any inquiry into poetic rhythms, one is seriously handicapped by the inexactness of the old terms. Prosody, regarded as the science of verse-notation, is today about as scientific as pre-Galilean astronomy. Its inherited ancient terms—iambic, trochaic, anapæstic, dactylic, etc.—deserve no better fate than the scrap-heap, after which a modern science of prosody might be built upon sound foundations. Indeed, a beginning has been made. There is quite a bibliography of scientific articles by philologists, chiefly German, on the subject of speech-rhythms and verse-rhythms; and Dr. William Morrison Patterson, formerly of Columbia University, has made a most valuable contribution in his volume, *The Rhythm of Prose*, and in the phonographic researches which led up to it. In reviewing this book in April, 1918, I said:

"I am quite out of sympathy with those sensitive poetic souls who resent this intrusion of science. The truth can do no harm, and in this case it must do incalculable good in the enrichment of our sense of rhythmic values. The poet of the future, discarding the wilful empiricism of the past and proceeding upon exact knowledge, will greatly develop and enrich our language-rhythms just as music-rhythms are being developed and enriched by composers fully educated in their art, who add knowledge and training to that primal impulse of heart and mind which we call genius. The poet hitherto has worked in the dark, or at least in a shadow-land illumined only by his own intuition. Henceforth science will lend her lamp; she will hand him the laws of rhythm just as she hands to the painter the laws of light and color, or to the architect the laws of proportion and stress."

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Of course modern investigators, including Mr. Bridges, recognize that even common human speech falls necessarily into what Sievers calls *Sprechtakte*, or speech-bars, rhythm being a universal law which prose must obey as well as poetry. So Mr. Bridges is in accord with the scientists in declaring that "in English accentual measures the natural speech-groupings must be supreme."

Prof. Patterson's researches were interrupted a few years ago, unfortunately, by his resignation from the faculty of Columbia University. At present he is living in old Charleston, where, according to a recent letter, he hopes soon to resume his study of this subject. The work of a progressive scientific mind in this much-befogged specialty cannot fail to be illuminating. H. M.

REVIEWS

CHARLOTTE MEW

Saturday Market, by Charlotte Mew. Macmillan Co.

A slim book of verse laden with so much observation, knowledge, passion, sentiment, that it is like an apple-tree burdened by the excess of its own beauty. Almost each poem has the material in it for innumerable poems, and almost each poem is weighed down with words. Yet though Miss Mew lacks simplicity, she never lacks interest. I think, in fact, that this book would appeal to a larger audience than any book of verse published in the past two years, with the possible exception of Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Second April*; because the poems tell stories,